

On the circulation of swastikas

De la circulation des croix gammées

Overal hakenkruizen

Philippe Mesnard



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/temoigner/878>

DOI: 10.4000/temoigner.878

ISSN: 2506-6390

Publisher:

Éditions du Centre d'études et de documentation Mémoire d'Auschwitz, Éditions Kimé

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 October 2014

Number of pages: 6-7

ISBN: 978-2-84174-674-3

ISSN: 2031-4183

Electronic reference

Philippe Mesnard, « On the circulation of swastikas », *Témoigner. Entre histoire et mémoire* [Online], 118 | 2014, Online since 01 October 2015, connection on 23 October 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/temoigner/878> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/temoigner.878>

ON THE CIRCULATION OF SWASTIKAS

→ By **Philippe Mesnard**,
Head of the Editorial Board

Let us take advantage of the fact that a four-monthly editorial is, by definition, no longer current news in order to express a few retrospective considerations. Less than a year ago, the Nazi swastika resurfaced in Putin's media to denounce what they called Ukrainians' Fascist downward spiral. An easily recognized phraseology. This "wooden language", as formerly was said, aimed to disqualify the separatist and pro-European orientations of the majority of the opponents having brought about the deposition of Viktor Ianoukovitch, and also to legitimize the potentially warmongering positions of the new tsar.

Up to now, we agree, don't we? **HOWEVER, TO MERELY SEE IN THE USE OF THE WRETCHED SYMBOL A LIE FROM THE PROPAGANDA**, as European news easily claimed, is this not making Ukraine wear the overly comfortable clothes of the – excuse the term – victim? Ah! I can already hear it said that I am exaggerating, that I must not treat lightly the violent repression which the opponents at the Maidan square have been struck with.

Of course, this has never been my intention. Yet, on the other hand, as Perec used to say, facts do not speak for themselves. They were digested, on one side, in a pan-European discourse that had no trouble in presenting democratic transparency as its main quality, on the other side, by the speech of Putin's party. Yet, if the latter's stratagems are easy to detect, we can however become more closely interested in the free circulation of the swastika and to the truths it refers to, whilst being surprised that Europe is turning a blind eye to Ukrainian extremism. A Europe, by the way,

where the last parliamentary elections revealed the power of extreme-right politics. Something to meditate, isn't it?

But is the goal here to talk of Ukraine (target of Russian propaganda)? **OR RATHER TO TALK OF THE MEDIA POPULARITY OF THE SWASTIKA?** In reality, both. The particular example serves as a way to show the general issue, to illustrate and to remember it. It is difficult to circulate on this terrain where those who are recognized as attackers – and who openly held this role – point to... truths nevertheless. It is on this point that I wish to more precisely express my opinion. We easily notice a tendency to gather everything within a same victim discourse, all formations and all groups as soon as they are the target of political violence. In this respect, the main concern of transmission would not so much seem to be (or no longer) information itself – omnipresent, today, up to a point of saturation –, as much as learning to grasp the complexity of the reality which information refers to, which at times is referred to from a distance all the while misleadingly making us believe that it deals with reality "in live".

Of course, complexity is also a word that can be used to avoid saying anything. However, in the name of this complexity, we must also learn to suspend such moral judgements which focus on the image of the victim and to better discern what is being shown. It is thus important to remember the permanence of Ukrainian ultranationalist ideas that still honour their pro-Nazi heroes guilty of anti-Semitic crimes, such as Yaroslav Stetsko and Stepan Bandera, to name only two. What is more, the latter was celebrated in 2010 with

his statue being raised, nonetheless! In other words, it is not because Ukraine has claimed to be against Vladimir Putin's authoritative regime, that Ukrainian's main political tendencies are all unanimously close to democracy as it is conceived (imagined) within the European Community. Furthermore, forbidding the Russian language at the end of February 2014, forming straight away Oleskandr Turchynov's temporary power, hardly gave any guarantees of democracy. To say it somewhat briefly: the enemies of our enemies are not necessarily our friends.

THE EXPRESSION SEEMS TRITE, IT IS TRUE.

The problem – for it is important to maintain a contradictory debate –, is that the downward spirals of Ukrainian extremists are not a reason to disqualify the entire society and not to believe in its potential and its desire to reach a democracy. Ukraine's sad history should be remembered. The history of a country that was for centuries caught between, broken up and invaded by their neighbours (Poland, Austria, Germany, tsarist Russia, Soviet Union). Remember the two great famines, the repression and the communist deportations during the 1930s and then after the war. Serious disputes heavily strained the relations between Ukraine and the ex-Soviet Union. Civil war carried on in this *Bloodland* until the beginning of the 1950s. And such brutality.

BRUTALITY, EXACTLY. At least, it was not directed anymore to the Jews, for in these lands, there weren't any Jews remaining. It must be said that their decimation began with the pogroms dating from the end of the 19th century, largely carrying on during the 1914-1918 war, the 1920s and ending under the Nazi reign. In this sense, Putin's propaganda points to the truly sensitive zone of a country which, as well as all the Baltic countries, never really revisited their enthusiastic and systematic participation in the Shoah. This precisely leads us back to the swastika.



Save the date

The French issue of the journal
*Testimony between history
and memory* will be presented
by Luba Jurgenson

in the presence of Philippe Mesnard,
at the Palabres meeting on 7 October 2014
at 7pm at the Hungarian Institute
(rue Bonaparte 92, 75006 Paris).

Initiative: CIRCE (Centre Interdisciplinaire de
Recherches Centre-Européennes), Paris-
Sorbonne University and Adice (Association
pour le Développement des Initiatives
Citoyennes et Européennes).

Organisation: Aurélie Rouget-Garma,
Paris-Sorbonne University and CIRCE,
Aurelie.Rouget-Garma@paris-sorbonne.fr

Coordination: Malgorzata Smorag-Goldberg,
Paris-Sorbonne University and CIRCE,
maougocha@usa.net

www.facebook.com/Palabres

Indeed, when I saw the swastika being waved on television news, I immediately said to myself that this cross is everywhere. We see it continually, alone or with Hitler's portrait. Also, it is not merely the question of the place of the Holocaust within our culture that must be debated, but also of the Nazism within this very culture. What is most worrisome, is the naturalization of this symbol. Immediately recognizable, simple, it already had every necessary quality to become a sort of badge or a label. Today with pedagogy being one of the key words relating to memory, it would be interesting to decipher this paradoxical iconolatry with students. What do you think of this idea? ■

To learn more about Ukrainian ultranationalism, its nostalgia and its support from the state, I would like to refer to the particularly enlightening article by Delphine Bechtel, 'Les pogroms en Galicie, 1941: des pages blanches de l'histoire à une histoire en pointillés?', in Luba Jurgenson & Alexandre Prstojevic, *Des Témoins aux héritiers. L'écriture de la Shoah et la culture européenne*, Paris: Petra, 2012, 113-135.